

Teaching Idioms in Business English

Since we teach at the National Research University –Higher School of Economics our students of Business English are often referred to the articles published in the Economist. These articles are full of idioms and we should familiarise the students with the idiomatic expressions they are likely to encounter in contemporary business world. The University EFL students get to know that people don't begin a project taking the first steps. They «put a stake in the ground». For example: Our business in California has grown steadily over the past two years. Now is the time to put a stake in the ground and open a regional office there. Businessmen don't call each other to discuss progress – they «touch base» trying to ensure everyone has the same information. For example: «We will touch base at the meeting.» Later, if the project is not going well, they don't end it. They «pull the plug.» For example: After losing millions of dollars drilling for oil in Nebraska and finding nothing, the oil company finally pulled the plug on its exploration project. The Collins English Dictionary (2006) defines an idiom as «an expression such as simile, in which words do not have their literal meaning». Idioms are categorised as multi-word expressions that act in the text as units. According to Longman Idioms Dictionary (1998) an idiom is «a sequence of words which has a different meaning as a group from the meaning it would have if you understand each word separately». It is difficult for English native speakers to master English idioms, let alone EFL learners because the figurative meanings of English idioms cannot be predicted through an analysis of their individual word meanings. Nippold and Martin (1989) stressed, «Failure to grasp the meanings of idioms can impinge upon an individual's understanding of language in social, academic, and vocational settings». Apparently, teaching EFL learners to use English idioms is considerably critical for us - EFL teachers. The university EFL students should clearly understand that idioms shouldn't be broken into their elements because they are often referred to as 'a fixed expression'. According to Carter (1998) proverbs, catchphrases, allusions, idiomatic similes and discursal expressions are classified as idioms. He identifies the following characteristics of idioms: non-substitutable more than a single-word semantically frozen. Since the role of context is central in language learning we try to provide a rich meaningful context for students' language learning and practice. For instance, Nippold & Martin (1989) emphasise that linguistic contextual information enhances adolescents' interpretation of idioms. The contextual cues surrounding a particular word can help students get the meaning of idiomatic expressions. Thus, introducing English idioms within interesting articles can possibly help EFL students to understand and remember them better. While reading business magazines and newspapers students notice that modern business idioms are often grouped around some theme or key words, such as battles and wars, for example. They often come across such idioms as «taking flak», «reinforcing one's position», «laying low», «making a move» and many others. In this article, we will continue exploring useful war idioms. Business in most cases is considered to be a battlefield and it is not surprising that many business strategies and management techniques were first developed in the military. Actually, it's quite natural that businessmen think about business competition in terms of war. Companies fight each other for the market share working out different strategies about how to win the battle. While one company is trying to attack, the other company is defending its market position. Everywhere you look in business, you will find the language of war: the writers often think – and talk – about business competition in terms of

attacking and defending, gaining and losing ground. Business is full of such war and battle idioms. Let's take a passage from the article entitled «Europe's 750 billion euro bazooka» (http://www.economist.com/blogs/charlemagne/2010/05/euro_crisis_2), which illustrates the usage of business idioms borrowed from the military vocabulary. I think this bellicose talk of fighting battles with markets and being at war with perfidious bankers (to quote Mrs Merkel) may point to a useful analogy for what is going on in terms of political integration here, at least at this point. I wonder if this new intergovernmental war chest of €440 billion, working with the intergovernmental IMF, is a bit like the mutual defense clause, Article 5, in the NATO treaty, that says an attack on one member of NATO is an attack on all. That is hugely important, and commits each member government to big and serious things. But it is not the same as those member countries agreeing to pool their militaries. Therefore, to communicate effectively in business environment, the students need to learn these war idioms. Thus, we use various effective activities for teaching English idioms to university EFL students so that they can not only learn them effectively but also apply them practically. One model strategy we can choose to familiarise the students with the business idioms grouped by the key words „battle” and „war” is to provide them with paraphrased meaning of idiomatic expressions. It should be mentioned that students have to know or understand the individual words of an idiom before understanding the idiom itself. We should avoid introducing idioms which use new vocabulary words and be able to simplify the meaning of idioms. We could say, for example, that «to bite the bullet» means to make a difficult or painful decision. Students should know all the words used in our explanation as well, so we should use the simplest language we can. Even with advanced learners, simplifying idioms to their basic meanings make them easier to understand and learn. However, EFL teachers and learners still argue whether idioms should be paid so much attention to. They claim that idioms present problems in both understanding and in production. Idioms are difficult to understand because they are not easily unpacked from their component parts. They are difficult to produce because they often allow no variation. Scott Thornbury argues that «few errors sound more comical than an even slightly muddled idiom.» On the other hand, students who have reached a rather high level of English often become demotivated and complain that there is nothing left to learn. And in the Higher School of Economics we have got quite a number of students who have already mastered all the major grammar structures, have acquired a wide range of lexis and can communicate in a variety of business situations using a good deal of expressions. And they still are eager to improve. A well-known expert on EFL teaching Tim Bowen believes that learning idioms would seem to be the answer. An appreciation of such expressions and a feeling for how and when they are used can certainly improve the learner's ability to read in the target language and to understand business conversations. But how can the student make sense of innumerable idiomatic expressions existing in business environment? How should we, teachers, deal with this type of language in the classroom? There are various things to keep in mind: for most students (with a possible exception of advanced ones students) this type of language is useful receptively rather than productively and should be left on a receptive level. However, this does not mean that it can be introduced only once and then forgotten. Each expression needs to be practiced a number of times in exercises if it is to be assimilated. Instead of just memorizing the explanation of the expression students develop the ability to infer its meaning from the context. Where the meaning is metaphorical (for example, set the bar too high above), understanding literal meaning can help the students infer the meaning in the specific context

in which the expression is used. Where the meaning of the words is opaque (fend off, up to scratch), meaning can be inferred only if there are sufficient clues in the context itself. Another approach is to compare idioms in the target language with idioms in the mother tongue. This can be both an interesting exercise in itself and a means of remembering idioms more effectively. According to the opinion of different researchers it is advisable to start teaching idioms from the ones which are 110 identical in their meaning to the native language (the domino effect), and then pass over to the similar idioms (between the devil and the deep blue sea), and finally, to the dissimilar idioms (the gravy train). In our University classes we use a wide range of techniques of teaching idioms, which are organized so as to provide gradual transition from mere understanding to communicative usage of business idioms. We choose a few idioms from the classroom text, define them and present them within the larger context of a short paragraph or dialogue. It is interesting to contrast the literal and figurative meanings and show how they are related. Incidentally, drawing idioms is effective for showing the contrast between the literal and figurative meanings. At the stage of checking comprehension we ask students to rewrite the sentences with idioms in non-idiomatic English. And vice versa, to rewrite simple texts using the given idioms. Facilitating deeper understanding of the idioms we promote different creative activities, both written and oral ones, such as expanding on the sentences, containing idioms, using them as initial or concluding sentences. Students can be easily involved in dramatizing idioms and act them out to compare in a humorous way literal and figurative meanings of idioms. Another activity in the class is charades. Students act out the literal meaning of an expression and the class must guess the figurative meaning. Retelling exercise is another effective way to learn idioms. The teacher tells a story containing several idioms and the students have to retell it or write it down trying to use as many of the expressions as they can. Add-on Story is an exciting exercise which contributes to speech competence. Write a list of idioms on the board and start the narrative by using one of the idioms. Students have to add to the story by each contributing one sentence containing a new expression. Advanced students select idioms from newspapers and magazines and bring them to class for further discussion. In the exercise called Paragraph Completion omit the idiom in context from a paragraph and have students complete the passage with a phrase that fits the context, then give the omitted idiom. Thus students will see how they have inferred the idiom's meaning from the context. It should be mentioned that students need to practice not just using idioms in sentences but also responding to their use and understanding their meaning. To give students practice hearing the idioms used, it is a good idea to ask them questions using idioms: «How can teleconferencing help business people be on the ball? », «Are you good at handling deadlock? » By asking questions, we can also prompt students to use idioms correctly. It is also important to realize that individual students learn and retain vocabulary differently. This often depends on their learning styles. The so-called visual learners need to see words or pictures and often have to write the word down to make sure it is spelled correctly. They may need to read the word in a sentence in order to remember it. Auditory learners need to hear the word or phrase said aloud. They concentrate on the sound of the word and the pronunciation is 111 important for them. They may also need to put the word into a sentence and practice saying the sentence out loud or to themselves. Kinesthetic learners may need to move about or even make gestures while learning vocabulary. They may connect words with movements or feelings. As classes are made up of a variety of students with different learning styles and needs and each teacher is also an

individual, it is necessary to find different activities for different groups. Remaining flexible, allowing both yourself and your students to experiment with new methods and new ideas can be rewarding for both you and the learners. So, answering the question if business English students need phrasal verbs, metaphorical and idiomatic language, and the full range of lexis used by native speakers, we can say that many learners will use English predominantly as a lingua franca to speak to other non-native speakers. The English used in these situations will differ radically from that used by native speakers, and in particular will involve a far more restricted range of lexis. One might argue therefore that these learners have no need of the extended lexical range used in Britain, America, Australia and so on, and that these features can be excluded from our teaching. However, if the students contact frequently with native speakers – for instance if they are working for an American multinational or take frequent business trips abroad – then the situation changes. They may not need these expressions productively, but they will almost certainly need them receptively. They may still want to read business press, for instance *The Financial Times* or *The Economist*, or to follow business news on international channels such as CNN or BBC World. Teaching idioms is especially relevant for a student of Business English. A businessman needs correct English grammar as well as the vocabulary of «business talk» to sound competent in his job.

Literature

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